



## Syria

Archéologie, art et histoire

94 | 2017

Dossier : Archéologie des rituels dans le monde nabatéen

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Elizabeth FROOD & Rubina RAJA (éd.), *Redefining the Sacred. Religious Architecture and Text in the Near East and Egypt, 1000 BC-AD 300 (Contextualizing the Sacred 1)*  
Inge NIELSEN, *Housing the Chosen. The Architectural Context of Mystery Groups and Religious Associations in the Ancient World (Contextualizing the Sacred 2)*

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/5841>

DOI: 10.4000/syria.5841

ISSN: 2076-8435

### Publisher

IFPO - Institut français du Proche-Orient

### Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2017

Number of pages: 406-408

ISBN: 978-2-35159-739-2

ISSN: 0039-7946

### Electronic reference

Ted Kaizer, "Elizabeth FROOD & Rubina RAJA (éd.), *Redefining the Sacred. Religious Architecture and Text in the Near East and Egypt, 1000 BC-AD 300 (Contextualizing the Sacred 1)* Inge NIELSEN, *Housing the Chosen. The Architectural Context of Mystery Groups and Religious Associations in the Ancient World (Contextualizing the Sacred 2)*", *Syria* [Online], 94 | 2017, Online since 31 January 2018, connection on 24 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/5841> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/syria.5841>

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Elizabeth FROOM & Rubina RAJA (éd.), *Redefining the Sacred. Religious Architecture and Text in the Near East and Egypt, 1000 BC-AD 300* (Contextualizing the Sacred 1), Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, 15,6 x 23,4, xx + 260 p., 57 ill. n/b + 9 ill. coul., 1 tabl., 4 dessins au trait, ISBN : 978-2-503-54104-4.

Inge NIELSEN, *Housing the Chosen. The Architectural Context of Mystery Groups and Religious Associations in the Ancient World* (Contextualizing the Sacred 2), Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, 21,6 x 28, + 323 p., 194 ill. n/b, 1 tabl. n/b, ISBN : 978-2-503-54437-3.

- 1 With the two volumes here under review, Brepols in 2014 launched a new series, *Contextualizing the Sacred*. The inaugural volume *Redefining the Sacred*, edited jointly by the two series editors, follows on (but does not quite form the proceedings of) a stimulating workshop organised in Oxford in March 2009.<sup>1</sup> As a collection of essays its aim is to delve into “questions related to the architectural development and multifunctional roles of temples and sanctuaries in the Near East and Egypt” (p. 5). In the introduction (‘Material culture and religious identity in the Ancient Near East and Egypt’) Frood and Raja briefly present the objective of their new series, as providing a platform “to contextualize and recontextualize material related to religious institutions and experience in antiquity” (p. 3) through the incorporation of interdisciplinary methods, and as encouraging others “to pose new questions of already well-contextualized material through diverse methodological and theoretical frameworks” (p. 3). The long methodological “position paper” (p. 8) by Ganzert (‘Contextualizing the sacred’), with its shrewd portrayal of the hierarchies between the divine and the human as “healing sovereignty” (p. 40), asks questions about the meaning of sacred space. It should be said though that throughout this first volume as a whole, the main focus is on ‘redefining’, not only on contextualising, the sacred.
- 2 Three papers constitute the section named ‘Regional perspectives’, covering different regions and different eras. Pongratz-Leisten (‘Sacred topography of the empire: inscribing social order into the cosmic order’) shows how in third- and second-millennium Mesopotamia the king aimed to create “an image of spatial coherence” among the elites of the cities of his kingdom, and her focus is on “the strategy of producing the idea of a relational space, in which political elites of the periphery bond with the political centre under divine surveillance” (p. 56). Morstadt (‘Phoenician sacred places in the Mediterranean’) provides a study of the religious topography of the Phoenician world, with specific attention to Carthage, noticing how the variety of cults finds itself inserted in the urban configurations. Coppens (‘Designing the sacred in early Ptolemaic times: a continuum of concepts’) analyses the way in which the Egyptian priesthood devised a sacred complex known as the *wabet* in the course of Egypt’s final native dynasty and its Ptolemaic successors.
- 3 These are followed by four papers under the joint header of ‘Places, communities, and individuals’. Hermann’s article (‘The KTMW stele from Zincirli: Syro-Hittite mortuary cult and urban social networks’) discusses how this specific basalt monument throws unexpected light on the religious practice of so-called “intermediate social groups” (p. 169) in the Syro-Hittite kingdom. Baker (‘Temple and city in Hellenistic Uruk: sacred space and the transformation of Late Babylonian society’) studies the changes in organization of sacred space that Uruk underwent in the late Achaemenid and Seleucid periods as a result of “wide-ranging cultic reform” (p. 183). Lichtenberger (‘Continuity, discontinuity, and change in religious life in Southern Syria during the Roman period’) argues that “redefinitions of the past” (p. 225), rather than straightforward persistence of religious notions (as they can be observed in Egypt), allow for a recognition of religious continuity at the Decapolis cities of Dion, Gerasa and Gadara. Finally, Menze looks at the *Hymns against Julian* by Ephraem Syrus and observes how they can reveal their author’s assessment and comprehension of the balance of power between the imperial court and the Church, contrasting Ephraem’s approach, in which there was no space for a “spiritual role” (p. 233) of the emperor, with “the Eusebian model of Church and State” (p. 237).

- 4 As will be obvious from these brief remarks, *Redefining the Sacred* is a collection of papers on extremely diverse, even disparate subjects. However, the introduction by Frood and Raja impressively manages to draw out the common threads and accordingly creates a framework for the individual contributions that is more coherent than reading through the papers themselves might suggest.
- 5 The aim of the second volume, Nielsen's *Housing the Chosen*, is "to show how architecture can illuminate the functions of religious assemblies of various kinds in ancient society" (1). To that end, the lion's share of the book presents the archaeological sources for worship by the mystery groups and religious associations of the subtitle. Part I ('The architecture') starts with two very brief introductory chapters on the pre-Hellenistic periods, including the 'external parallels' of the Levant and Egypt -despite the fact that the new series' emphasis on the links with the Ancient Near East may have led one to expect more attention to be paid to the possible antecedents to the material from the classical period. The two major sections of Part I divide the evidence from the Hellenistic and Roman periods between assembly rooms inside and outside the sanctuaries. It leads to an occasionally very artificial, and even confusing, division of the material, as in the case of Dura-Europos, where the sanctuaries of Zeus Theos, of Adonis and of Atargatis are discussed among the 'inside' group, but those of the Gadde, of the Palmyrene gods (aka that of Bel) and of Aphiad are grouped with the rooms for assemblies outside the sanctuaries -seemingly based on the (totally unsubstantiated) understanding that the first three had a more 'public' status whereas the last three were "belonging to foreign gods and were thus probably private" (p. 142). As part of the chapter looking at assembly rooms outside the sanctuaries, Nielsen also discusses the archaeological settings for Jewish and Christian worshipping groups.
- 6 The final two parts of the book are much shorter. Part II ('The cultic functions of religious groups') is presented as an enquiry into "the functions served by the various settings" (p. 196) that appeared in the catalogue that is Part I, and consists of two chapters, one on initiation rites and mysteries —with Nielsen distinguishing between what she labels "the 'collective' mysteries" (p. 197) and "the 'individual' mysteries" (p. 207), with the former "named after a sanctuary" and the latter "after a deity", questionably adding that this points to "the closer relationship between the initiates and the god in question" (p. 197) —and the other on assemblies and banquets (apart from those dealing with initiation and mysteries and therefore already discussed in the previous chapter). This suffers from too many generalizations and one wonders, for example, whether it can truly be said that the cults of what are (again, problematically) grouped together here as 'the Syrian and Phoenician gods' "required members to own specific knowledge, belong to a specific ethnicity, or to pass specific tests" (p. 196).
- 7 In Part III ('Considerations of typology'), which consists of one chapter and "also serves as a general conclusion" (p. 241), Nielsen acknowledges at the outset some of the problems encountered in the archaeological material: "It is often difficult to determine whether the same setting was used for mysteries and initiations, and if the mystery halls could also function as assembly halls for religious associations and for communal dining." But this acknowledgement does not hint at any awareness of the somewhat circularity of her approach throughout. Yes, the identification of the archaeological material that lies at the heart of her study is often highly problematic, but nonetheless religious sites that are supposedly linked with mysteries (a highly controversial working category in itself in most cases) or 'associations' (similarly problematic, and

seemingly based in many instances on the presence of benches, or the fact that inscriptions of organised groups of worshippers relate to them) are then investigated from the perspective of how their ‘architecture’ reflects their functions as religious buildings for mystery groups or religious associations! The final chapter provides ‘types of settings’ for the various groups under discussion, and comes up with a rather banal division between temple-type, cave/grotto type, and banqueting/house type, before petering out with a final sentence stating that “a great number of the assembly halls that I have explored in this book” could also be tagged as *basilicae* (p. 253). A lengthy but remarkably out-of-date bibliography and four helpful indices close the book, whose main usefulness lies in the fact that it has collected material from a wide range of archaeological reports and presents it in an accessible manner.

- 8 Fortunately the edited volume by Froom and Raja had got *Contextualizing the Sacred* off to a promising start, and in the meantime a number of other books, both monographs and edited volumes, have been published that do great credit to the new series, including two very important volumes (4 and 8, respectively) on religious life in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.<sup>2</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Disclaimer: this reviewer participated in the workshop but did not submit his paper for publication.

2. M. BLÖMER, A. LICHTENBERGER & R. RAJA (éd.), *Religious Identities in the Levant from Alexander to Muhammed. Continuity and Change* (2015); R. RAJA (éd.), *Contextualizing the Sacred in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East: Religious Identities in Local, Regional, and Imperial Settings* (2017).

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